

APPENDIX: READINGS

Reading 1

Vietnamese Culture in a Pluralist Australia: Conflict or Harmony?

By: Nguyen Hoang Cuong *

It has been said that most non-Aboriginal Australians do not understand how the Aborigines feel about their land and what it means to them.

The Vietnamese – although the newest settlers in this country – certainly do.

To both peoples, land is part of their very existence: what Henry Bergson would call *élan vital* (thrust of life) definitely comes from the land on which they live.

As put by a boat person, “we Vietnamese are stubborn and arrogant. We Vietnamese

cannot live happily anywhere except in Vietnam”.

Vietnam, their fatherland, is still there, looking like a beautiful dragon resting along the shore of the South China Sea. To make the Vietnamese flee from the land of their ancestors, something very wrong must have happened there.

Bruce Grant, in his book *The Boat People*, has touched upon that point, writing:

At times, when telling the story of the boat people, it seemed that Indochina had become the vortex of all that is wrong with

mankind... The boat people have indeed made us all again look at ourselves and at the state of our world.

I could have come to this great seminar just to listen, learn and try to understand some of the issues confronting the multicultural society of Australia to which I now belong. However, the organising committee has kindly asked me to represent the Vietnamese community to address this formidable issue of Vietnamese culture in Australia. What, then, is Vietnamese culture? What will become of it in a pluralist Australia? Is it a source of conflict or can it co-exist in harmony with other cultures in this new environment?

The issue appears to be so large that nothing short of an in-depth treatment would do it justice. Within the time frame I have been given, I can only mention a few basic points. Such an approach is bound to be unsatisfactory, especially for

students of Asia and the Far East. Please accept my apologies for the shallowness of my remarks.

To understand the Vietnamese, one must look at their culture in the setting of their country and their history.

The land of Vietnam is beautiful but it is not a free gift from Nature. Year after year, century after century, generation upon generation of Vietnamese have had to wrest it from bush and swamp, save it from flood, drought and typhoons. Having poured sweat and tears on it, they also have had to defend it against foreign invaders.

Of the two thousand years of recorded Vietnamese history, about half was spent under Chinese domination. During this long and harsh period (111 BC to 938 AD) the Vietnamese absorbed Chinese culture but rejected Chinese rule. The era of independence started in 938 and

soon afterward Vietnam emerged as a civilized country, which, in some respects, compared rather favourably with China. Indeed, although the Three Religions – Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism – were brought to Vietnam by the Chinese, there could be noticed in the ensuing centuries many periods when the teachings of Buddha, Lao-tse and Confucius were more in evidence in the Southern country than in the Northern empire.

A millennium of political independence was long enough for society to get organised, institutions to be established and artistic genres of many kinds to blossom. The blending of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism - especially the Vietnamese kind – resulted in an exquisite philosophy of life, full of wisdom and rich in moral comfort. It is something I would call “pastoral humanism”.

Throughout most of their nation’s history, the Vietnamese have been taught that true manhood consists in realising one’s true self and restoring the world’s moral order. A Vietnamese “gentleman” would understand the reason of the heart, penetrate to the source of the wandering principle, know the way of Heaven, practice the virtue of perfect humanity (nhân) and the duty of justice in interpersonal relations (nghĩa), embellish himself with the proper rites (lễ) and with good music (nhạc).

Perfect humanity (nhân) involves respect for others and respect for oneself. Perfect humanity requires an indivisible sense of respect for human dignity and human life. Perfect humanity knows of no national boundaries. “Within the four seas, all men are brothers.”

In days long gone by, all Vietnamese “gentlemen” would also think of ordering their

national life. But those who wished to order their national life would first set about regulating their family life. Those who wished to regulate their family life would first set about cultivating their personal life. Those who wished to cultivate their personal life would first set about setting their heart right. The heart set right, one's personal life is cultivated, one's family life regulated, one's national life orderly, then, there is bound to be peace in the world. There lie the precepts of the Great Learning.

The Vietnamese revere education and learning and therefore respect the teacher and the elderly. In society, at the top, the king personifies the law of Nature, the way of Heaven, the supreme authority. Next comes the teacher, who symbolizes culture and learning. At the base, the father is the head of the family, itself considered the building block of society.

Lin Yutang, the famous Chinese-American philosopher and writer, once proposed a test with the following question: "What type of husbands and wives and fathers and mothers does a civilization turn out?" Lin, then, claimed that "besides the austere simplicity of such a question, every other achievement of civilization – art, philosophy, literature, and material living – pales into insignificance".

This is how Lin Yutang explained his test:

Such a test has the strange effect of levelling all mankind by brushing aside all the non-essentials of civilization and culture, and bringing all under a simple and clear equation.

As biological beings, there is not getting around the fact that we are all born as babies, suck at mothers' breasts, and marry and give

birth to other babies. Every man is born of a woman. Some have refused to become parents, but no man can refuse to have parents. So, then, we come to the basic relationship between man and woman and the child.

Lin's point of view implies, whatever the reason may be, that a man or woman should not leave this world without children.

If the sterility is due to the body, then the body is degenerate and wrong. If it is due to the high cost of living, then the high cost of living is wrong. If it is due to a too high standard of marriage, then the high standard of marriage is wrong. If it is due to a false philosophy of individualism, then the philosophy of individualism is wrong. If it is due to the entire fabric of society, then the entire fabric of society is wrong.

But to the Vietnamese, the cult of life must be accompanied by the cult of harmony and the assuming of human responsibility. All the wisdom of the past combined with the harsh reality of life during long periods of foreign occupation has forged the Vietnamese personality into a three-pronged cultural stand: To Be – To Belong – To Behave.

The whole history of Vietnam constitutes a long and painful test for that national character, but it has repeatedly shown that the Vietnamese always stand up to each and every challenge. With this in mind, let us now shift our attention to another chapter of human relationship: their encounter with the West.

The French arrived in Vietnam in the middle of the nineteenth century. It took them many decades to overcome the resistance of Vietnamese patriots, but at the beginning of this century (20th century), the

whole Indochinese peninsula can be said to have been firmly under French control. A number of developments recorded at this juncture also prove that many Vietnamese by then realized that Buddhist compassion, Taoist metaphysics and Confucianist ethics were no match for French weapons. In other words, spiritual values may hold true in the very long run, but Western science and technology give overwhelming and immediate satisfaction. Western culture is so tangible that it can annihilate your thinking and feeling by shattering certain values in your way of life.

As they did with the Chinese threat before, the people of Vietnam resisted French rule but absorbed French culture. When World War 2 broke out, this catastrophe however opened up new opportunities for national independence and freedom from oppression for many nations of the world. The Vietnamese were not among these, though.

Already exacerbated by the harsh rule of French colonialism, Vietnamese patriotism gave way to a revolution, which claimed to be the champion of the poor and the oppressed, to be materialistic and invincible and to embody ineluctably the future of mankind!

Communism came as the greatest shock and challenge to Vietnam's most cherished traditions. Fatherland, independence, human values, the cult of harmony, the nation's roots and its culture... all disappeared in a sea of blood: the revolution that had fired the imagination of young and old, soon proved to be merely the seizure of power by a new ruling clique in whose eyes human life became less precious than that of an earth-worm and politics was downgraded to the level of animal taming.

That is how Vietnamese refugees are now in Australia.

What did the refugees bring along with them?

Clearly and simply, a belief in the family as the fundamental building unit of society, religion as a spiritual right, freedom of expression, choice of way of life for themselves and their children, respect for the law and social order. Have these values anything incompatible with Australia's mainstream cultural values?

What are the refugees deprived of?

In coming here, the refugees have severed all cultural ties with their country. Most have arrived on Australian shores without any money and more importantly, in most cases, without kith and kin. Most refugee families are still split, husbands separated from wives, children from their parents. Can you, in all honesty, imagine any more disadvantaged migrant category?

And now, in their new environment, what new challenges do the refugees have to face?

Once more, they are in full contact with Western civilisation. Once more, the old challenge is back but it is now one of cooperation rather than rejection, one of adaptation rather than disengagement, one of contribution rather than withdrawal. There possibly is another challenge: it is how they will contribute to Australia's multiculturalism, still in an early development stage.

But prior to contributing anything to their new country, refugees from Vietnam must start life anew in a rather difficult economic environment. They know they must succeed. For them, there is no other alternative. When assessing their resettlement efforts, please simply remember that the basic motive prompting them to come here is deeply political: they

would need more time to settle down than, say, migrants from a more peaceful background.

What I have just said only points to a formidable task lying ahead of them. It is an experiment of a totally new kind, too. It is finally a challenge, which will test this small community of theirs and their cultural values, and their ability to survive culturally intact in their new environment. So, then, should we expect conflict or harmony? Pessimists would expect conflict, optimists would hope for harmony.

But let us listen to what they themselves have got to say. "Without work," a Vietnamese Boat Person recently exclaimed, "I have to be on the dole, and so become a burden to society. If I am lucky enough to land a job, I am charged with depriving somebody of his bread and butter. You know I cannot go home. So, fair Australia, tell me what to do!"

"In Australia," lamented another, much older, "the old are so free that they can go and live in a nursing home... and their children won't say anything in objection. Children won't even tell their parents they want to take care of them."

Hearing these stories, one cannot help wondering whether the seeds of cultural conflicts are right there. Yes, they are. But a few decades ago, when the longest established ethnic communities first made their presence felt in Australia, were such seeds not there for everyone to see? Who can say that these seeds of conflict have totally disappeared? Who can point to these conflicts to denounce multiculturalism? Who can doubt the contributions of such communities as the Greek, the Chinese, the Italian communities and many other communities as well?

Ladies and gentlemen,

A pluralist Australia, in my humble opinion, is an ideal environment for different cultures to co-exist and foster their own contributions. I would say in great confidence that such conflicts, if there should be any, will not last long. I would even say that such conflicts are both ephemeral and superficial.

Looking at the basic components of our traditional culture – family love, human freedom, and respect for social order – who would say they are in conflict with Australian values? On the contrary, one can only come to the conclusion that Australians and Vietnamese have much in common and that common ground is bound to produce peace and harmony.

By mentioning their common ground, I only want to say that both Australians and Vietnamese do not wish to see churches and pagodas

destroyed as in some Communist countries; both want to be free to build temples of any denomination; both sincerely believe that through their votes, citizens of a country can choose the kind life they want to live; both Vietnamese and Australians do not want to see the day when our own children can be prodded to denounce us as has been the case in some police states.

By mentioning their yearning for Harmony, I only mean that both Australians and Vietnamese have so very much in common that the conflicts that keep them apart are necessarily superficial. By that, I also mean the various basic factors that have brought various ethnic communities together over the past fifty years.

Since the Vietnamese left their country, many Vietnamese communities have sprung up in Australia and elsewhere. In their attempts at starting a new life, they have not come across too

many difficulties. In this new environment, Vietnamese children have done particularly well and this allows us to nurture the hope that cultural harmonization will not be an empty phrase in this humane society.

In conclusion, please allow me to restate a few important points:

To understand us, one must keep in mind that Vietnam is a country with a long cultural past and many cultural values. Located at the crossroads of civilizations, Vietnam has resisted foreign rule but it has always tried to absorb the best these foreign powers had to offer it culturally. One thousand years of Chinese domination, ten centuries of national independence, one hundred years of French colonization and thirty years of a seemingly endless war have made the Vietnamese what they are today.

Were it not for the Communist regime, which took over the country and started a revolution that has systematically destroyed so many of their moral and traditional values, no Vietnamese would have thought of leaving their fatherland.

But now that we have been implanted into a new society, we shall do our best to adapt ourselves to our new environment. However, we shall do our best to keep our basic cultural stand – To Be -To Belong -To Behave - for we are all convinced that it constitutes a national feature that not only explains our attachment to family life and other traditional values but also holds the key to Vietnam's extraordinary vitality as a nation, especially in moments of great dangers.

Right here, behavioural differences between Vietnamese refugees and their hosts might cause some frictions in some areas. Their eagerness to do

well, start life anew from scratch, recover some social status, may lead to misunderstandings or create some conflicts of interests with the more established segments of the larger community. But these “conflicts” should be viewed as passing phenomena experienced by all new ethnic groups in such a free and open society as that of Australia. Abstraction made of these “passing phenomena”, human beliefs and social values shared by Australians and Vietnamese will help the new settlers’ social integration to a great extent.

Finally, I should like to say that the presence of a successful Vietnamese community in a pluralist Australia can only strengthen Australia’s position in this part of the world and

consolidate her ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Indeed, Australia’s “crimson thread” has never been, and will never be, severed. On the contrary, with a new wave of migrants coming from the Asia-Pacific region, Australia’s “crimson thread” is beautifully enhanced by the addition of a tiny golden filament to the already rich tapestry of Australian society.

* Deceased on 13 May 1990.
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Reading 2

Rediscovering Our Roots *

By Phan Van Hung

I'd like first to share with you the story of my journey into music, because in some way it's also the story of my journey back to my roots. These roots, I did eventually find them, but not where I thought they would be!

When I was a teenager in Vietnam, not unlike many kids about my age, I learned to play guitar by myself and I used to sing while playing chords on my guitar. But I wasn't at all interested in Vietnamese songs, or in Vietnamese music in general. In fact I only played foreign songs, American, English, French or whatever. It was the time of the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel and I was fond of Peter, Paul and Mary, the American folk singers.

At the age of 17, I got the news that a scholarship was going to be offered to me to go and study

in France. It was a shock, because I suddenly realised that I didn't know one single Vietnamese song to take with me during my long years abroad! So in the following few months, I rushed to learn to play the Vietnamese zither (đàn tranh) and I discovered for the first time the works of the great Vietnamese songwriters such as Pham Duy.

That was for me a complete turn around – like a wake up call – and during my years in France, I left the Beatles aside to only play and sing Vietnamese songs. And I started to write my own songs as well, in Vietnamese naturally. What a contrast: in Vietnam, I only played foreign music. But now a grown up person living abroad, I was playing only Vietnamese music. Was it my way to get back to my roots? I did not know

then, but unconsciously I was trying to get back home somehow.

I came to Australia in 1982 as a refugee. My hope of soon returning to Vietnam had already long gone. It was a struggle at first. Understanding and speaking English was a problem. Earning a living was a problem too and I had various jobs, even at one stage making French pastry or selling computers. One day through a friend, I met an Aboriginal poet; her name was Margaret Brusnahan. Her poetry, so simple and so true, struck me in the sense that she talked about her loss of identity as a white person of Aboriginal descent, standing on the edge of both cultures. In her own words, she wrote:

*Please take my hand, I
need a friend,*

*Will you stick with me from
beginning to end?*

*Will you help me find out
where I belong,*

*Point out to me where I'm
going wrong?*

*I'm two people in one,
which is me?*

*Not knowing the real one is
misery.*

And it was my own misery too. I felt so deeply about what she said that I started putting her poetry into music, and I ended up performing these songs at various venues such as Tandanya and the Melbourne Museum. People were startled, because here I was, a Vietnamese guy singing Aboriginal poetry in an American folk style, complete with chords and picking technique! But the question is: Did I find my roots by doing so? The answer: Yes, I did ...

* This is part of a speech by Phan Văn Hưng at the Annual Conference for Teachers of Vietnamese, SA Vietnamese Teachers Association, Saturday 7/7/2007, Hindmarsh Education Development Centre, Adelaide. Posted on Vietland website on 13/7/2007 at <s152542055.onlinehome.us/xoops4/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=13618&forum=98post_id=5041#forumpost5041>